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ABSTRACT

An experimental freshman advising program at St. Olaf College, a private, church-related, liberal arts college, was evaluated. The freshman "cadre" program emphasized a living-learning environment, faculty adviser training, a structure that facilitated teamwork with colleagues, an interdisciplinary or random approach to matching up advisers and advisees, and career planning materials for use with freshmen. Junior counselors and faculty advisers participated in training sessions concerned with program goals, mutual roles, the nature of freshmen, and review of special materials. The evaluation involved four groups, each consisting of 24 freshmen, three faculty advisers representing different disciplines and four junior counselors (juniors who serve in freshmen dorms). The program was evaluated during the 1983-1984 and 1984-1985 academic years. In addition to evaluating the helpfulness and friendliness of the adviser, student questionnaires covered: the number of times that student met with the adviser, who the student consulted when making decisions about courses, whether advising met with the student's expectations, and the student's overall satisfaction with the advising experience. (SW)

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"A Cadre Approach to Freshman Academic Advising"

John G. Lygre

Introduction

Effective academic advising of freshmen can be as elusive a goal as any in higher education. Especially at a private, residential, liberal arts college the goal is hard to achieve and perhaps even more difficult to measure. In the process of seeking effective academic advising of freshmen, many fundamental educational questions are raised. For example, how does one define the role of an academic adviser both in theory and in practice? Do peer advisers or a residential setting make much difference? Does matching disciplinary interests of advisers or freshmen enhance the quality of advice given?

Two years of program evaluations will be explained after the experimental freshman advising program at St. Olaf College has been described. Significant questions will be raised about the judicious use of resources, about relational expectations among freshmen, advisers and peer advisers, and about the nature of advising systems in private, liberal arts colleges.

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The Need

For the past twelve years national conferences on advising have proliferated. The initial conference of the National Academic Advising Association was held in 1976. The American College Testing Program has sponsored many regional and national meetings. A "developmental approach" to the subject is in vogue now. The Chronicle of Higher Education contained in the same issue (9/26/84) both a report on a survey of chief academic officers by John Minter Associates that "44 per cent reported that faculty concern about

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student advising was up" (page 25), and Victor Cahn's "Point of View" article titled "The Undervalued Task of Advising Students" that with reference to academic advising, "In fact, perhaps more than any other pedagogic task, it reflects a teacher's view of the value and purpose of a college education" (page 72).

Like many schools, St. Olaf College has established a committee every 4-5 years to study advising. A one-time "Advising Day" is often the most that comes from countless hours of faculty time. Some schools seem more serious about upgrading the advising program because they wishfully assume that a good academic advising program will directly improve the institution's rate of retention. Some student personnel practitioners or institutional researchers are even occasionally able to demonstrate a cause-effect relationship between advising and retention using reasonable reliable data. But more often than not, an improved retention rate is caused by a combination of factors, the least significant of which may be a beefed-up advising program.

At a selective liberal arts, residential, church-related school like St. Olaf College, where the retention rate has been traditionally high and has improved slightly over the past decade, it is difficult to expect an already strong and conscientious faculty to feel an urgent need to direct greater resources to an academic advising program. One has only to point to a 1977 Institutional Functional Inventory administered through ETS, where 75% of St. Olaf's juniors and seniors said they were "very satisfied" or "somewhat satisfied" with the quality of academic advising rendered, to make the case against increased attention to advising.

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Yet just the preceding year, in 1980, a contrary message was conveyed by St. Olaf faculty. The "Project for Faculty Development Program Evaluation," conducted by the Center for the Study of Higher Education at the University of Michigan, concluded from a survey of St. Olaf faculty the following: "St. Olaf faculty differ most markedly from their colleagues at other liberal arts colleges in their perceptions of awards received for advising students (much lower) and for obtaining grants (much higher). To improve faculty academic advising skills...and improve faculty research and scholarship skills were the two highest unfulfilled needs."[1]

A small group of faculty and administrators, tired of inaction by previous committees, began meeting together and pledged to try something different without the blessing of the faculty as a whole. The group devised a "pilot project" that began in September of 1983 and continued the following year with the aid of a small, external grant the group procured. The need, however amorphously conceived and defined, nevertheless was translated into an experiment that is continuing into 85-86.

Concept and Structure of the Freshman "Cadre" Program

Two aspects of the word "cadre" applying to the program conceived were "a framework or skeletal organization" as well as "officers of a regiment around whom new enlistees may be formed." Twelve faculty were enlisted for the 83-84 program conceived around five purposes:

1. Living-learning environment

   The classroom or adviser's office should not be the exclusive domain for advising. Just as advisers occasionally invite

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advisees to their home, so also students want to be seen by advisers against the background of their residential setting.

2. Faculty development

   The University of Michigan study cited earlier indicated the need faculty feel to gain specific advising skills. New materials and training approaches can be beneficial. A structure that facilitates teamwork with faculty colleagues should also be attempted.

3. Interdisciplinarity

   At St. Olaf freshmen have traditionally been assigned to advisers on the basis of area of intended interest. As at many liberal arts colleges, faculty in the humanities tend to favor an interdisciplinary or random approach to the match-ups. The concept of interdisciplinarity was adopted to see whether advising is more effective when three faculty representing different disciplines work together as a team.

4. Integrating career planning

   Developing career planning materials for use with freshmen and training faculty in their use was a difficult--perhaps unrealistic--program purpose.

5. Model for wider campus use

   This purpose was listed without any prior commitment to extending the program.

Kildahl Hall, consisting of 144 freshmen, was chosen because it has traditionally been the freshman dormitory where cameraderie is greatest. Two-thirds of the co-ed dorm was selected for the 83-84 program for two reasons: (1) equal number of men and women by using

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two of the three floors; (2) by the time the program was conceived in late spring, it was decided that twelve faculty advisers would be a high enough number to recruit. Kildahl's head resident had already been selected along with 24 junior counselors. (Junior counselors are junior students who voluntarily serve in freshman dorms; twice as many apply as can be selected.) Freshmen were assigned randomly to Kildahl. Then four groupings were arranged, each consisting of 24 freshmen, 4 junior counselors, and 3 faculty advisers representing different disciplines.

At this juncture it is well to describe structural features that were different between the 83-84 and 84-85 programs, because when the evaluation results are discussed below the structural differences may be relevant considerations. Structural changes in 84-85 consisted of:

1. The head resident was carefully chosen with full knowledge of the program goals.
2. All of the dormitory was used even though the sexes were not represented equally (two-thirds men, one-third women).
3. By using 144 freshmen all 24 junior counselors were needed as well as a larger group of 18 faculty advisers.
4. The junior counselors helped select the faculty advisers with whom they wanted to work.

Junior counselors and faculty advisers participated in training sessions concerned with program goals, mutual roles, the nature of freshmen, review of special materials, and brainstorming about program elements. A separate picnic and breakfast was held during freshman orientation in September for

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cadre groups. Activity money was provided to the head resident primarily during 84-85 for regular dorm-wide TGIF's as well as small group activities.

Three sets of special materials were devised. "Green sheets" were planning documents for one's academic program for indicating possible majors, planning specific course choices, and assessing one's own progress toward individually defined goals. "Pink sheets" consisted of an interest and skills inventory devised in conjunction with the career planning office. Freshmen were to complete the "pink sheets" in October and review the appropriateness of their own perceptions of their interests and skills the following April. "White sheets" were one-page academic program descriptions containing tidbits or "folk wisdom" not available in the catalog, but also listing specific faculty "contact persons" as referral sources for a particular department or program.

Structure of Evaluation Procedure

From the program's inception in the Fall of 1983, a structure and procedure for evaluation was developed that was replicated the second year. The experimental group was called "pilot cadre advisers" in contrast to "modified cadre advisers" and "random non-cadre advisers," which hereafter will be referred to as Groups 1, 2 and 3 respectively. Group 2 was like Group 1 only in terms of (a) receiving the same materials (i.e. green, pink and white sheets) and (b) receiving a copy of the admissions application forms of their freshman advisees. Group 2 advisers received only a written explanation why they were receiving the materials and that their advisees would participate in a Spring survey about their experience in being advised. Groups 2 and 3 were

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identical in the sense that adviser-advisee match-ups were based upon intended area of interest indicated in contrast to the consciously interdisciplinary way Group 1 match-ups were made. The Groups were approximately the same size. (As mentioned earlier, Group 1 was based in a single dormitory with knowledge of the program shared by freshmen, junior counselors, the head resident, and faculty advisers. Groups 2 and 3 were scattered around campus, with many of the freshmen knowing nothing about the pilot program.)

Surprisingly, both times the survey was administered a higher response rate was achieved by Group 2. The lowest rate by any group either year was 67.3%; the highest, 81.0%. A good rate of return was therefore achieved for all three groups each year.

Evaluation Results

Not all of the survey items will be recorded below since some were less significant and since some were asked of Group 1 only. (1, 2, 3 refer to Group 1, 2 or 3 respectively; figures are per cents.)

1. How many times have you met with your current adviser? (Exclude instances in which you were only obtaining a signature.)

	83 - 04			84 - 85		
	_1__	_2__	_3__	_1__	_2__	_3__
Not at all	11.3	17.2	17.1	3.2	5.0	7.9
Once	7.0	6.3	22.4	14.9	13.3	16.9
2-3 times	56.3	56.3	36.8	48.9	56.7	51.7
4-5	16.9	20.3	17.1	22.3	23.3	20.2
6 or more times	8.5	0.0	6.6	10.6	1.7	3.4

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Both years Group 1 ("pilot cadre advisers") had fewer responses to "not at all" than the other groups and a greater percentage response to "6 or more times." No "required" meetings were expected for Group 1 advisees.

2. When making decisions about which courses to take next year, from whom did you first seek advice?

	83 - 84			84 - 85		
	_1__	_2__	_3__	_1__	_2__	_3__
My J.C. (Junior Counselor)	31.3	22.2	21.4	42.7	27.6	40.5
Upperclassman other than J.C.	9.0	23.8	28.6	13.5	19.0	19.0
My academic adviser	13.4	23.8	11.4	16.9	12.1	16.7
One of my teachers	14.9	4.8	10.0	1.1	5.2	6.0
Other	31.3	25.4	28.6	25.8	36.2	17.9

For "other" most often another freshman or close relative was cited. While there is little indication that a particular group is any more or less likely than another group to seek out a particular kind of peer or authority figure for advice, it was striking to see how seldom one's academic adviser is the first person sought out for advice concerning course planning and how readily the junior counselor is approached. If the question were changed to indicate "from whom did you receive the most useful advice," it would have been interesting to see the degree to which the responses may have shifted.

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3. (For the following items the survey instrument gave respondents a choice of five responses ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." A "Y" below will indicate basic agreement with a statement, and an "N" disagreement.)

Please indicate to what extent you agree with the following statements that the adviser assigned to me as a freshman has:

a. Been friendly and approachable
b. Given me good information about curricular requirements and course offerings
c. Been helpful to me in the process of registering
d. Offered alternatives, but has left the final judgment to me
e. Been helpful in solving my academic problems
f. Expressed interest in my non-academic problems
g. Given me some help with career planning
h. Been available when I have needed him/her

	83 - 84						84 - 85					
	1		2		3		1		2		3	
	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N
a.	97.2	2.8	96.9	3.1	86.9	13.1	97.8	2.2	96.0	4.0	93.4	6.6
b.	77.5	22.5	79.3	20.7	64.9	35.1	87.4	12.6	80.3	19.7	76.9	23.1
c.	89.5	10.5	90.5	9.5	72.4	27.6	93.7	6.3	87.9	12.1	84.6	15.4
d.	95.5	4.5	82.3	17.7	83.6	16.4	89.8	10.2	88.7	11.3	91.2	8.8
e.	71.2	28.8	78.6	21.4	59.6	40.4	90.5	9.5	86.4	13.6	80.0	20.0
f.	59.3	40.7	67.6	32.4	47.0	53.0	72.6	27.4	64.5	35.5	60.6	39.4
g.	51.0	49.0	51.9	48.1	41.1	58.9	77.9	22.1	69.4	30.6	64.1	35.9
h.	84.9	15.1	81.3	18.7	74.3	25.7	85.3	14.7	81.4	18.6	79.1	20.9

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One is immediately impressed by the degree of satisfaction all three groups express about their advisers. Between the two years the most dramatic improvement occurred with advice about career planning (item g.). Surprisingly, career advising was emphasized less during training sessions for advisers and junior counselors in Fall '84 than in Fall '83. In fact the "pink sheets," devised with career planning consciously in mind, were downplayed in 84-85.

Item f. "expressed interest in my non-academic problems," contained results of special interest to the Steering Committee. Because in 84-85 money and the head resident's energy were directed to social activities inside and outside Kildahl Hall, it was gratifying to see Group 1's response to this item.

In every instance except item d. Group 1 gave a more positive response in 84-85 than in 83-84. Possible reasons for such improvement will be suggested later. Nor is this positive direction diminished by recognition of the fact that for Group 3 every response in 84-85 was more positive than in 83-84. Only an extensive longitudinal study can show whether trends are due to whims and changes in fortune on the one hand, or conscious efforts with personnel and programs on the other.

4. Has the advising you have received met your expectations of what should be provided by a faculty adviser?

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	83 - 84			.	84 - 85		
	_1__	_2__	_3__	.	_1__	_2__	_3__
Yes	33.8	56.7	40.0	.	67.0	65.0	42.9
Somewhat	52.1	33.3	32.0	.	26.6	21.7	40.7
No	14.1	10.0	28.0	.	6.4	13.3	16.5

Taking the "Yes" and "Somewhat" categories together, the only strong increase in satisfaction occurred in Group 1. The program coordinators think there is a simple yet instructive explanation. In 83-84 freshmen greeted by j.c.s with the customary "What's your name and where are you from?" in practically the next breath heard, "You are part of a special program in academic advising." Heightened expectations unsupported by effective program components yield confusion and disappointment. Program actions spoke louder than words in 84-85.

5. How satisfied are you with the overall advising experience you have had this year?

	83 - 84			.	84 - 85		
	_1__	_2__	_3__	.	_1__	_2__	_3__
Very satisfied	26.8	37.5	33.3	.	56.8	45.0	34.4
Somewhat satisfied	47.9	40.6	25.3	.	31.6	31.7	45.6
Somewhat dissatisfied	18.3	15.6	34.7	.	9.5	20.0	16.7
Very dissatisfied	7.0	6.3	6.7	.	2.1	3.3	3.3

Taking the "Very satisfied" and "Somewhat satisfied" categories together, the greatest improvement occurred in Groups 1 and 3, partly due to the circumstance that the randomized Group 3 respondents during 83-84 had a large number of "Somewhat

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dissatisfied" students. In the "Very satisfied" category Group 1 clearly improved the most.

In the survey itself items 4. and 5. were not placed close together. The survey also included a number of additional questions not being reported here. In the case of Group 1 students, there were questions not asked of Groups 2 or 3, such as questions about specific program efforts like a breakfast. There were also questions asked of Groups 1 and 2 that were not posed to Group 3, such as their assessment of the green, pink and white materials.

Conclusions

Many conclusions can be drawn from any advising program that contains some of the components of the "cadre advising program" just described. Some reflection upon the five program purposes cited earlier in the section Concept and Structure is instructive.

1. The living-learning environment provides a very positive dimension to the advising relationship. Neither advisers nor any residents of Kildahl Hall have expressed dissatisfaction with this dimension in the seventy-nine pages of narrative comments made by respondents to the surveys.
2. No survey of faculty advisers has been taken that assesses whether the cadre program has contributed to campus efforts in faculty development. Five full-time faculty members, four of whom were themselves cadre advisers, have been a part of the Steering Committee for three years and have been strong supporters of the experiment. At times advisers have felt greater guilt in this program because of heightened expectations by others and themselves. Yet faculty speak

well of the printed materials developed for their use, their better understanding of the roles of head resident and junior counselor, some growth in working with faculty from other disciplines, and a clearer understanding of effective components for academic advising programs.

3. Advisers have been encouraged by the perception that student satisfaction with advising can be as high with an interdisciplinary approach as when match-ups between students and advisers are based upon shared disciplinary interests. Problems developed when some residents of Kildahl Hall were nursing majors even though none of the cadre advisers was a nursing faculty member.

   As the program continues some efforts will be made to try the traditional disciplinary approach to match-ups while maintaining most other program components. This suggestion was more prevalent than others in the narrative comments offered in the survey. Seeing one's advisees in one's own classes or in the hallways of one's academic workplace adds a dimension that an interdisciplinary approach in a residential college lacks.

4. Career planning is difficult to integrate within a freshman advising program, as exemplified by previous comments about survey item 3.g. mentioned earlier and the conscious decision by the Steering Committee to downplay use of the "pink" sheets in 84-85. Yet advisers agree that more should be done to schedule topical sessions in the dormitory and to relate cadre programming to programming efforts initiated by the career planning office.

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5. Whereas some faculty have felt the experiment should be expanded to include a second freshman dormitory, during 85-86 additional program improvements in Kildahl Hall will be attempted. Some of the perceived weaknesses follow:

   a. Who should initiate and implement program ideas--head resident, J.C.s, freshman or adviser--needs clarification.

   b. A stronger academic dimension to the nature of the programming is desired by all parties.

   c. Students and advisers will be matched by disciplinary interest to the extent that students have preferences and the eighteen advisers represent most disciplines.

   d. A master calendar and periodic newsletter will be established so that the emphasis is upon fewer events carefully coordinated and strategically scheduled. Heightened expectations produced many guilt feelings among all parties since complications developed over who initiates an activity, how it relates to other activities, publicity, intended audience, and the relationship among social and academic program goals.

   e. Successful program elements, some of which are exemplified by survey results mentioned earlier, will be communicated so that a greater sense of pride is developed that fosters stronger advocacy for program expansion.

The program steering committee will continue evaluating modifications that are made and survey results. It will carefully weigh the difference between perceived and measurable gains, time expended by faculty and administrators, program costs, and social and academic progress made by freshmen and junior counselors. Whether a

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residential, liberal arts college like St. Olaf College can continue a tradition of relatively high student satisfaction with advising despite lack of a separate director or office of academic advising, and despite a system for advising the remaining freshmen and upperclass students, remains to be seen. Yet the very fact that students are fairly satisfied with a "non-system" should prompt practitioners of advising to keep asking penetrating questions like: "What does the college community and personnel who work with students contribute to effective advising or other student services that cannot be measured?" and "What demonstrable loss would occur if certain resources specifically directed toward a particular advising program were to be removed?"

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